Series: Ecclesiastes

Sermon #3: It's Not What You Think

Ecclesiastes 6, 7

Dr. Matt Cassidy --- February 21, 2021

Well, good morning, Grace! Well, it's good to be here, right? I mean, it is good to be here and now … what a week. I'm never going camping again. Before we go on to our learning time together, I wanted to tell you how our church has been able to respond to the blizzard and the disaster that hit Austin especially. I'm so proud of this church and how we've been able to help. So, let me just give you some things that you might not know otherwise.

I talked to one of our members, Dan Berger, this week. He's—let me get his title right—he's the division manager of the Community Risk Reduction Division of Travis County. So, the Community Risk Reduction Division of Travis County—they are trying to reduce the amount of risk we go through day to day, but also during disasters. So, he kind of oversees that. So, I asked him what life was like. And he said it was insane.

What happened on that level is that many of the critical systems that are needed to keep a city healthy crashed. They just broke. For example, the 311 number wasn't working. So, many if not most of the calls were going to 911, and the dispatchers couldn't handle that many calls. And people were panicked and they were feeling a sense of frustration because they weren't talking to someone and were being put on hold. And the people that were calling 911 were from all over the country, because people from Pennsylvania and New Jersey were calling and saying, "Listen, I haven't heard from my son in two days. He's got a wife and three kids. The last we heard they had no power and were freezing. You need to go there and check on them."

Now one of the problems is the actual 911 system, the first responders are in charge of a very limited number of things that they can do. They can take people to the hospital, they can go to crashes and protect people while they clean it up, they can put out fires. But their job is not to do a health check on someone who might be sick or freezing. They can't do that.

So, in their big briefing room they were saying, *What can we do? How can we do this?* So, one of the men in leadership says, "There's this group, it's an Austin disaster group or something."

And Dan Berger said, "Wait a minute." He'd been serving as a firefighter for at least twenty years and doing arson investigation as well. And in arson investigation he had done work with Austin Disaster Relief Network—ADRN. He said, "Are you talking about ADRN, Austin Disaster Relief Network?"

He said, "Yeah, sure."

Dan said, "Oh, I know about those guys. We used them multiple times when the houses burned down. We handed over the people to ADRN and they just took care of them and never got a thing back. I think that's what we ought to do."

So, the leadership said, "Let's push as much as we can to ADRN, Austin Disaster Relief Network."

Let me tell you about them. In 2009 when we had a previous disaster, one of the hurricanes, and Austin was ill-prepared to take on the many people that were coming from New Orleans, and we couldn't help. We weren't equipped to and they didn't want us to. Well, the capital "C" Church, all of the churches in Austin that wanted to participate, said, "Let's get trained. Let's learn the vocabulary. Let's prepare for the next disaster." And it's been running great since then. Not only did we help them get started, but they were using our facilities for over five years until they outgrew it. As a matter of fact, last year this church gave almost $64,000, over the last twelve months. That's your generous giving, and now they could use the money that we gave them.

ADRN took on the call from the county that was needed, and the county people required them to give a loop back—like, what's going on, did they call you, did ADRN help you? And here's what they heard. They said, "ADRN was awesome. I actually talked to a person. That was huge. They were able to calm me down. I needed water and food …" One person said they needed medicine delivered and they delivered it.

What happened was ADRN set up warming centers around the city. The city only had one or two and you had to drive to get there. So, ADRN used the churches that had utilities still working—heating and water—and made those warming stations. Not only that, they deployed anyone with four-wheel drive vehicles to go and get them and move them to a house that they

would want to go to or to one of the warming centers, or deliver food or water or medicine. They did all that. Some of you were participating in that and enjoying the privilege of playing in the snow in your four-wheel-drive cars.

So, all that's going on. The word that was used by the senior leadership of ADRN's participation was "outstanding." So, we got to play a part in that. That's how we played a role, in our giving and in our participation.

I also want to let you know, just now as we've gone from response to recovery and now we're going to start seeing—when the snow thaws and the pipes—we're going to find out if they burst—we're going to have a lot of other needs. If you have a need, go directly to the ADRN website. If you would like to help in other people's needs because you would like to help clean out a house or fix a pipe or something like that, go directly to ADRN. They could use the help, and that's where you can get help. It's an awesome ministry and we're right there with them.

The second thing that we did—someone on our staff was watching the news and found out that in the city division, Austin Police Department, Austin EMS, and Austin dispatchers went to work and couldn't leave. They were stuck. They couldn't get home. And so, some of them were sleeping on cots. As a matter of fact, Dan, when he was at his workplace, he couldn't leave. He was sleeping on a cot. He's 6'4". His blanket was his bath towel. I would pay money to see him trying to get that bath towel to cover his feet as they were hanging over the cot. They didn't order enough cots from the previous disaster that we had here in Austin, so they ran out of cots. Some people were sleeping on the floor. They couldn't get home.

So, some of them just said, "Let's get some hotel rooms near our precincts and let's just spend the night there." And they were told, "Well, if you do, you're going to have to pay for it."

And then one of the police organizations came and said, "Hey, look, if you're one of the dispatchers or police, we'll figure out a way to get it paid."

So, they did. They saved their receipts and they had a bill of $28,000 and now they're trying to pay it off. Well, when I called the police information officer that we have a relationship with, he sent me to the person that has those receipts that's trying to raise this money. And Grace Covenant Church said, "We'll pay some of those. We'll pay $10,000." So, we're writing them a check for $10,000. It was a great phone call for me, because he said, "You just made a policeman cry." And I said, "Well, it's about time the shoe is on the other foot on that one. You've made me cry a few times." (That's actually true.)

And then, what about the homeless that are living up and down under the streets of 183 in northwest Austin? How do we help them in temperatures that can kill you, frankly? Ray Anderson is involved in a ministry group with other executive pastors in town, and a like-minded church up the road, Mosaic, has a ministry to the homeless. And they set up a situation where they could house some of these men and women and keep them warm and feed them and give then water. So, we gave towards that organization; we're giving them $5,000.

So, we have a lot of money that we were able to give away: $64,000, $10,000, and $5,000. So, you guys give yourself a hand, because we're expressing our generosity to our city.

Then also, just you guys doing the ministry—I have heard so many wonderful stories about how you guys have seen it—you've had the vision—every believer's a minister—caring for the neighbors in your neighborhood and the people you've had relationships with. You know, the COVID craziness has allowed us to connect in ways we haven't in maybe over twenty or thirty years. And now we know those names and we can care for them in this frostbite experiment.

So, again, great job, Grace. I'm so proud to be part of such a great church.

Let me pray and then we'll get started. Last week one of our applications was to pray like a four-year old. And we're going to pray like a four-year old. We're going to show appreciation for things we might have taken for granted eight days ago, right? Let's pray.

Dear God, Heavenly Father, Jehovah Jireh, the God who provides: we are grateful. And we haven't said that we are grateful for electricity and the line workers that make that happen; for plumbing and the city workers who make water come to our houses. We are grateful for that. We love living in a modern society, but we don't thank You for that. We are grateful.

Lord, I'd ask that You bless the families of those men and women and give them grace, give them rest. Bring us back to a sense of normalcy in those ways.

Lord, we're grateful for friends. We're grateful for the Church. We're grateful for Grace. We praise you for a church like Grace and for the capital "C" Church, the whole Church of Austin, and how we're able to share Your love; that You allowed this blizzard to come in so that the Church would be asked to do something that we weren't able to even get in the meeting with before, and now they're calling us. And they're blessed by it.

And Lord, I ask that the Church would continue to show love and bring the gospel message to the people whose ears You have opened. God bless our time together. I'd ask that You would help us open our eyes so that we might seize this moment. We praise You, Jesus. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Introduction

So, let's look at our passage today. It's in Ecclesiastes chapters 6 and 7. And much of life is the wisdom of God that's difficult to grasp. Much of life is a mystery, and it's to be enjoyed. That's the theme of the Book of Ecclesiastes itself, and this passage in particular.

Let me start with this Chinese parable that you might have heard before. It goes like this. It's about a man with wisdom that sees things maybe the way they are. The story goes like this.

A young man had a horse get away, and the horse ran and crossed the barrier where the nomads were living. And people in the little village that they lived in—they lived in a village on the frontiers of China—and the people in the village circled around the young man, the teenager, and consoled him because he had lost his horse.

But his wise old father said, "Why do you think that's a cursing? Maybe it's a blessing. It could be a good thing."

Months later the horse returned with a majestic stallion. And people said, "This is good for you. This is a blessing from God, I'll bet."

And the wise old man says, "I don't know. Who's to know for sure? It might actually be a curse."

They were able to make money. They were breeding with that stallion and things were going well. It also happened to be the favorite horse the teenage boy liked to ride. And one night when he was riding he was thrown from the stallion and he broke his hip and was maimed for life.

People circled around and consoled the young man that in his youth had lost his strength. And the wise old man said, "Why did you say that was a curse? Maybe that too could be a blessing."

A year later the nomads crossed the border and came into the village and they were at war. And they took up every able-bodied man to come and fight for them. By the time the war

was over, nine of the ten men that were taken were killed in battle. But not that teenage boy or the father, because the boy was maimed from being thrown by that stallion that he got when his horse ran away. And so, the teenager lived a long life and was able to care for his old father.

And the theme of the story is that what appears to be a blessing could be a curse, and what appears to be a curse could actually be a blessing.

That's what is happening today in our storyline in the Book of Ecclesiastes.

If you understand, it is not God you understand.

--St. Augustine

St. Augustine said, "If you understand God, it's not God that you understand." And in the context that we're looking at in this whole Book of Ecclesiastes, if you understand God's plan, then it's not God's plan that you understand. That's the theme.

Life Is a Mystery

It's written by the wisest man in Old Testament times, and he says this. Life is a mystery, and the mystery's just to be enjoyed. In the preface of the book, he starts off saying, "Meaningless! Meaningless! All is vanity!" And he's not saying that life isn't worth living; no, what he's saying is that life is a puzzle. And you're not going to be able to put it together. There's a key to life that unlocks all understanding of how it all fits together, but God holds the key and He's not giving it up. That's his point.

Ecclesiastes 3:11

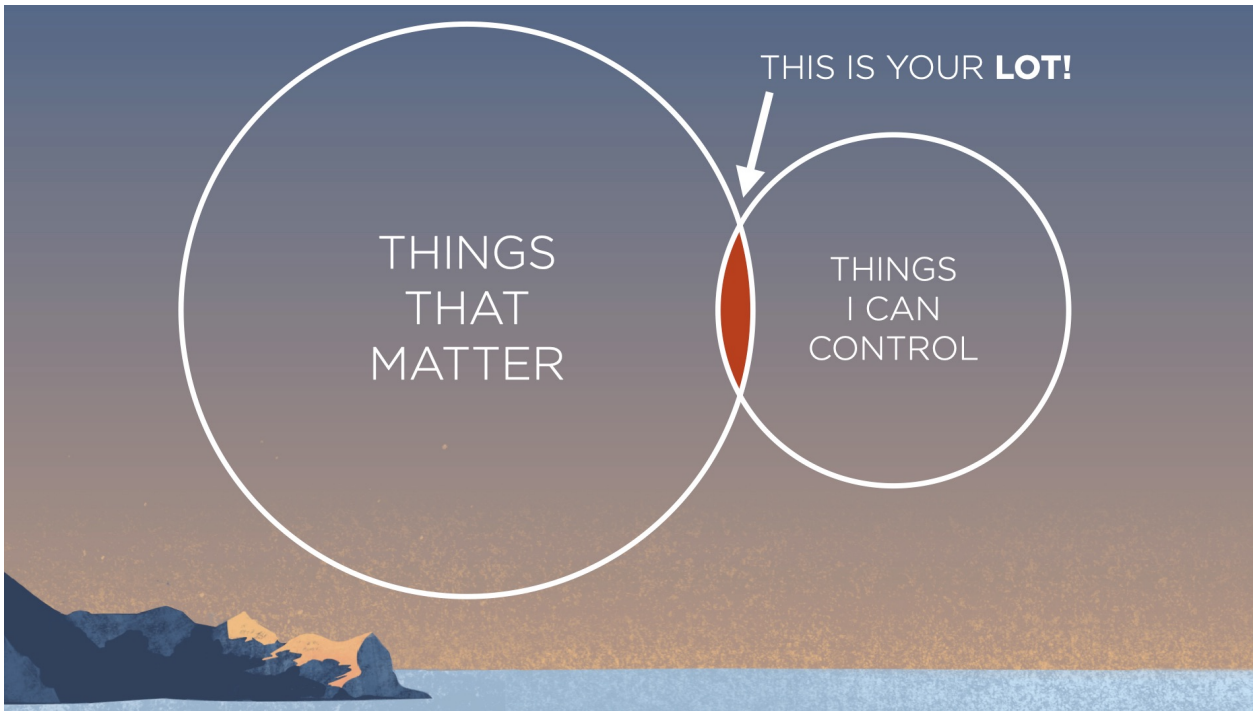
God has made everything beautiful in its time. God has also set eternity in their heart, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end.

In Ecclesiastes 3, verse 11, he explains the purpose not just of the book, but the purpose of life, kind of the nature of man. Let me read it to you, chapter 3, verse 11: "God has made everything beautiful in its time. God has also set eternity in their hearts, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end.

There is this incomparable, beautiful plan where every single thing has its purpose in its time. But man cannot make sense out of it. We are not like the animals. We have a long view of our history, and we can see what in the past makes sense in the present, and we project into our future, and we think we can know how things will work out. And there's this hunger lust in our souls. The eternity in our hearts—that's this hunger lust to know how it all fits together. And yet … and yet … God's not going to let us know.

And so, what happens is we look around us and we see the atrocities that are taking place in life, and we say, "Is there a beautiful plan? It does not appear to be a beautiful plan. It doesn't look like anyone's in charge to me."

So, Solomon's lot is this: just enjoy your lot. Just surrender and take it. Don't hate it, don't complain about it, don't argue with God about it. Just enjoy Yahweh, the one who designed it.



And graphically, could I put it this way so you can see this? Here are all the things that matter. Here are the things that I can control. This is what I'm supposed to focus on, right here, just the little red part. That, in Ecclesiastes, is called your lot. Play hard. Live your life into exhaustion. Because no one's going to get through this alive. You'll be dead soon, and forgotten. So, enjoy. Enjoy all of it. That's what he's trying to say.

And today when we're looking at chapters 6 and 7, Solomon's going to apply this value and this application to two different conundrums that we face, and how they can be reconciled if God is actually in charge.

And it has to do with this: why do bad things happen to good people, it seems like, and why do good things seem to happen to the wrong people? Why do good things happen to the wrong people, and why do bad things happen to wrong people? And in chapter 6 he's going to start by saying, *Well, you know, maybe not all good things are good.* Almost like our Chinese parable, right? Not all good things are good. Not all that glitters is gold. There may be some things that are good but are actually not good at all. And then, in answer to his question about why bad things happen to the wrong people, he's going to say, *Well, maybe not all bad things are bad. Maybe bad things can actually be good.*

Who are we to say, is what it comes down to.

Why Do Good Things Happen to the Wrong People?

So, here's Ecclesiastes chapter 6—why do good things seem to happen to the wrong people? And here's the point he's going to make. Happy things cannot make a happy person. Happy things don't make a happy person. You have to enjoy the gift giver to enjoy the gift. That's the big idea here.

Ecclesiastes 6:1, 2

I have seen another evil under the sun, and it weighs heavily on mankind: [2] God gives some people wealth, possessions and honor, so that they lack nothing their hearts desire, but God does not grant them the ability to enjoy them, and strangers enjoy them instead. This is meaningless, a grievous evil.

Look what it says in chapter 6, verses 1 and 2: "I've seen another evil under the sun that weighs heavily on all mankind: God gives some people wealth, possessions, and honor so that they lack nothing that their heart desires, but God does not grant them the ability to enjoy them, and strangers enjoy them instead. This is meaningless." It's a grievous evil to him. Have you been envious of someone else's wealth and honor and you think, *Man, they get all the easy stuff. How come the wrong people get that?*

Ecclesiastes is saying that honor and prosperity can't give you meaning or purpose or joy. Those are soul things. If you don't enjoy the Giver, you cannot enjoy the gift. And Solomon is saying, *Look, take it from me* ... His income, if you look at it mathematically and all that—he's making about over a million dollars today. And he's saying, *A million dollars a day, I was king of a powerful Middle East country, and I did not enjoy the Giver in a season of my life, and I was miserable.*

Gifts don't make people happy. A family friend is part of an international resort community. And she's hired by the resort to take care— some of them are family resorts—they have different types of hotels, like pay scales. There are some three-star, four-star—there is a five-star hotel, $1,000-a-night kind of place. And she said that if you're working the five-star hotel, that's where the most security is. And you're thinking, *Well, yeah, that makes sense. That's where the valuables are. Just the watches alone, you need extra security.*

No, I'm sorry, that's not why. The very expensive hotel needs the most security because they have the most calls in the middle of the night for domestic abuse and domestic violence. Because you can have a full belly, and your soul is dying of starvation. It doesn't help if you don't know the Maker.

So, why does it seem like the wrong people get all the good stuff? It's not always the good stuff. Things don't make people happy. You have to enjoy the Giver first.

Some of you know stories of a small child that loves her parents. She's grateful towards them and respects them. She has one toy to her name. She names the toy, she hums, she skips, she sings the toy songs—couldn't be any happier. And then the family next door has a child who has rooms full of toys and picks one up and throws it down. *What's next? Is that all?* If you don't love the Giver, it's really hard to enjoy the gift. Otherwise you just start feeling entitled.

All physical things suffer from what's called the law of diminishing returns. That means the more you do it, the more you have it, the more you experience it, the less joy you get out of that, because they're temporal things. So, all they can give you is pleasure, not happiness. Stuff gives you pleasure. Stuff can't give you happiness.

And so, that was the thesis of Solomon's point. Now, true to his style—this is the style in which he writes a lot of Ecclesiastes—he gives us a principle, and then he gives us exaggerated examples to prove the point. This time he's going to say, *Look, let's just go crazy with these blessings that we're talking about, and I'll show you what I mean.*

Ecclesiastes 6:3, 6

A man may have a hundred children and live many years; yet no matter how long he lives, if he cannot enjoy his prosperity and does not receive proper burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he …

6 Even if he lives a thousand years twice over but fails to enjoy his prosperity. Do not all go to the same place?

So verses 3 through 6 say, "Look, a man could have a hundred children and live many years, and yet no matter how long he lives, he cannot enjoy his prosperity and does not receive a proper burial. I say a stillborn child is better off than he."

That's a six … he turns it up to an eleven. "Even if he lives a thousand years twice over but fails to enjoy his prosperity. See, do not all go to the same place?" Solomon is saying, *Look, it's not about the number of years or the number of blessings. I'll give you two thousand years, I'll give you a hundred kids, run up everything that is your heart's desire.* He's going to say it doesn't matter and better that you died on your birthday. It's better to be stillborn, because when you're stillborn, it's like you wouldn't know, you wouldn't have lived the experience of what's called destination sickness.

Destination sickness is this: a lot of us are pursuing stuff, and it's the pursuit that keeps us running. We're going to get there someday. Destination sickness is for the few people who actually arrive there in the corner office or the house on the hill or whatever it might be. And they actually get there and say, *Uh-oh.* It doesn't fulfill.

Solomon is saying, *If I give you two thousand years and a hundred children, you would have to know that every destination was a dead end; no work; only gave pleasure, never happiness.* He would have to live with the t-shirt … You guys know the figure of speech "Been there, done that"—right? He's got a t-shirt that says, "Been everywhere, done everything." And on the back it still says, "I can't get no satisfaction."

Let's ponder this for a moment: Who wrote "I Can't Get No Satisfaction"? The guy who had been everywhere and done everything.

So he says, *Look, it's not the number of friends, it's not the number of years. You've got to enjoy the Giver if you're going to enjoy the gift.*

Philippians 4:12-13

I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, having abundance and suffering need. [13] I can do all things through Christ.

And that's why Paul is able to write about contentment—look what he says: "I have learned the secret …"--it's not obvious—"I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Christ." Paul has rearranged his life around Christ, and now, whatever lot he's experiencing, he's fine. He's good.

Ecclesiastes 6:10-12

Whatever exists has already been named, and what humanity is has been known; no one can contend with someone who is stronger. [11] The more words, the less the meaning, and how does that profit anyone? [12] For who knows what is good for a person in life, during the few and meaningless days they pass through like a shadow? Who can tell them what will happen under the sun after they are gone?

Solomon now is going to answer the question, How do we live in a world that does not seem fair? How are we supposed to live when it seems like the wrong people are getting the good stuff? Here's what he says, chapter 6, verses 10 through 12: "Whatever exists has already been named, and what humanity is has already been known; no one can contend with someone who is stronger. The more words, the less the meaning. How does that profit anyone? Who really knows what is good for a person in life, during the few and meaningless days that he passes through like a shadow? Who can tell them what will happen under the sun after they are gone?"

He's calling out the beautiful plan. He's saying, *We've got this beautiful plan.* But he says, *It's set. It's already been named*, he says. Check the box; He's done; it's in the can; it's already going to happen. So, he says, *Okay, look, you don't know what it is. You can't negotiate it, you can't make sense out of it. So why are you arguing about it?* The more words, the less

meaning—yappity, yappity, yap. Looks like you're critiquing on why this thing ought to be going differently. You're going to wear God down? Really?

And that's why he starts saying, *You better be careful about you defining what is good and what is not good.* It says in verse 12, "Who knows what is good for a person?" You live the lot you get dealt; not the hand that you wanted, not the hand that you feel you deserve. You just play the hand you got.

Because you can see here, he's saying, *Oh, you little man.* He's putting man in his place. He says, "You cannot contend with someone stronger." I would say, "You're fighting way out of your weight class here, bro." You better be careful about who you're arguing with. You're passing through like a shadow. Romans 9 says, "Who are you, O man, to argue with God? Does the pot say to the potter, 'I don't like the way you're making things'?"

At the very end of that verse he's talking about how we're all going there. "What will happen under the sun when they're gone?" Here's how it looks. In a very short period of time you'll be put in an incinerator and housed in a vase about that big. Then your family, your relatives, will pass that urn around, awkwardly not knowing what to do with that. And then it's just going to go missing. And no one is going to know who did it. No one is going to ask why. It's just kind of a thing. And that's the nature of man—dirt, dust, in an urn.

And in this passage, he's saying, *Are you sure you want to argue with God about what is fair? No, no you don't.* Why does prosperity seem to go with the wrong people, and power? How are we supposed to live with that? He's saying here—it sounds trite, but it's actually true—here's what he's saying: you've got to live by faith.

And what is faith? What is the faith in? Here's a couple of bumper stickers that are true. "You don't know what tomorrow holds, but you know who holds tomorrow." That's faith. It's in the character of God. Or put another way, especially in the context of what we're learning right now, "You don't let what you <u>don't</u> know about God destroy what you <u>do</u> know about God." And his plan … You don't let what you <u>don't</u> know about what God is doing in your life supersede about what you <u>do</u> know God is doing in your life. What is He doing in your life? He's predetermined that you're going to become like Christ in all of life. You know that to be true. Don't let what you <u>don't</u> know about what God's doing in your life to pull rank on what you <u>do</u> know.

Here's what you do know about the nature of God. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever would believe in Him would have eternal life. God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but so that people would have eternal life." So, you know that about the nature of God. Don't let what you don't know about His plan corrupt what you do know about His nature.

What does it say about the author? Now in light of what we know about the author, we can maybe not take up a cause to argue with Him. Oh, little man …

That's chapter 6. Why do good things seem to happen to the wrong people?

Ecclesiastes 7: Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?

Chapter 7 is: Why do bad things seem to happen to the wrong people too? Bad things seem to happen to good people a lot.

Ecclesiastes 7:1

A good name is better than fine perfume, and the day of death better than the day of birth.

So in verse 1, he says, "A good name is better than fine perfume. The day of death is better than the day of birth." Those are two contrasting things, and they're both saying very similar things to our Chinese parable: be careful about what you name things.

Sweet perfume is a metaphor. It's a picture of something that's expensive, but festivities, joy. And he's saying this. A good name is better than that. See that smelly guy over there that hasn't showered in a week because of this blizzard? Okay, that guy made a name for himself—the way he cared for his family, he sought after how he could love his neighbors. That has a good name; he's got an odor that is preceding him coming into the room. That's better than sweet-smelling something that's not understanding the purpose of life.

He says that the day of death is better than the day of birth. Think about it this way. What's better: when the race starts, or when the race ends? Well, it's when the race ends. That's when you see the results of people's skills and their workout. At the beginning of a race, everybody's lined up, and that's potential—their birth, right? That's potential. And do you know

what potential is? There's another word for potential: nothing. Potential means nothing. Ask any recruiter. It means nothing. And so, your death day is better than your birth day, because then you get to see what a person made out of their life.

> **Ecclesiastes 7:2**
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> **It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of everyone; the living should take this to heart.**

That's part one of that. Part two is death, or a house of mourning, or a funeral, is a much better teacher. A coffin is a much better instructor than a crib. You can learn a lot from a coffin. That's what he's going to say here. He says, *You will grow wise if you go to a funeral home.* Look at chapter 7, verse 2: "It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for death is the destiny of everyone; the living should take this to heart." Death is the destiny of everyone, the living should take this to heart. It's better to go to the house of mourning, because if you go to the house of mourning, you're going to learn something. You're going to learn a lot about a lot about life, maybe even the purpose of life. And Solomon is saying, *Trust me, okay? I invented the Great Gatsby parties—had them every weekend. You couldn't imagine the sorts of festivities I involve myself in, and I can't remember one time where someone sat back and said, "Wow, I'm just a vapor, here today and gone tomorrow."*

No one gets out of here alive, he says. And you can learn from the house of mourning.

There are <u>two valuable lessons you can learn at a funeral</u>. He says that <u>one is how to learn about a life without regret.</u> I have been to a lot of funerals—many funerals. The first funeral I ever participated in was when a junior in high school was murdered in a drug exchange that didn't end well for him. And his casket was surrounded by about ten to twelve of his peers weeping and screaming bitterly. We couldn't take the casket out of the church because they wouldn't let it go. I was working as a student in grad school and I looked at the mentor that was running the event, and I said, "Is this how all funerals go? What's happened."

He said, "That is regret."

The first funeral I went to as an adult and I saw what happens when you regret being a bully, when you regret saying harsh and ugly things to people, when you regret withholding

affection and love, you can't get it back, and you want to scream at the pine box, but it won't hear you.

Funerals will teach you a lot. I've been to funerals where people went on and on for thirty-five minutes. They live for the trivial at the expense of the eternal. Don't tell me another story about how this guy loves classic motorcycles or he's really great at bowling. Can you please tell me something that he did that mattered? Nope. You learn.

The second thing you learn at funerals besides how not to live with regret is that you're next. When you go to funerals, most of the time—or maybe it's just me—I'm thinking, *Okay, yeah, but I wonder if there's a reception afterwards. Can I have barbecue? Do I have time for that?* But then there's that one funeral where maybe you identify with the person a little too much and you realize, *Wait a minute. My number's almost up.*

Solomon is saying this. You want to grow wise? Here's what it looks like. Go to a funeral home, buy yourself a casket, put your name on it. Have an interview with death, because death is going to say this: I'm coming after you. You're going to die. Live like that.

This sounds morbid, right? But it's not. It's actually a person that grasps what he's talking about here. He says, *Death is the destiny of all men. We should think about that.* And it doesn't make you morbid. On the contrary, it adds depth to your soul, it adds depth to your relationships. It makes decisions easier for you, about what you should care about and what you shouldn't. Understanding death, you start living with purpose in life.

It's campy, but you might remember the movie *What About Bob?* It's about this guy with all of these phobias and fears and compulsions, and he just can't live a functional life. And his psychiatrist has just gotten crazy annoyed with Bob and finally just ties him to a tree and wraps dynamite around him, and he's going to blow him up. And Bob is thinking, *Oh, wait, this is a therapy. You're trying to get me to realize my own death is imminent and I should live as though I were going to die.* It's a funny movie and all that kind of stuff, but what's interesting is that some of you have graduate experience in counseling, and it's based on truth values.

If you took graduate level courses in counseling, you probably studied existential psychotherapy. I did in my graduate school. And the classic, the tome, the Bible of existential psychotherapy text is a book *Existential Psychotherapy* by Irvin D. Yalom. When I read this in the eighties, I thought, *This is like* What About Bob?—*that's death therapy.*

A denial of death at any level is a denial of one's basic nature and begets an increasingly pervasive restriction of awareness and experience. The integration of the idea of death saves us; rather than sentence us to existences of terror or bleak pessimism, it acts as a catalyst to plunge us into more authentic life modes, and it enhances our pleasure in the living of life.

--*Existential Psychotherapy*, Irvin Yalom

Look what he says about people once they realize they're going to die soon. This is out of a textbook, so this could be really boring. But it's supposed to be that way—it's a textbook. "The denial of death at any level is the denial of one's basic nature and begets increasingly pervasive restrictions of awareness and experience. The integration and the idea of death actually saves us. It acts as a catalyst to plunge us into more authentic life modes and enhances our pleasure of living life."

Once we integrate death into our life, it plunges us into a deeper experience.

We have two lives, and the second begins when we realize we only have one.

--Confucius

Confucius said it this way: "We all have two lives. The second begins when we realize we have only one."

Solomon is saying this: Go to the house of mourning, come to the realization that you only have one life to live, and watch what happens with your gratitude towards creation, towards your gifts from God. Realize that everything that you have is being loaned to you by God. And it reshapes your goals. It will rearrange who you have as friends. It will change your life.

If you're in Christ, you don't fear death. And so, all that death can bring is a lesson to you. And that's how to live. There's no fear in self-forgetfulness. Death therapy leads you to self-forgetfulness, because you're going to die and be forgotten. Well, let's get to that today.

Now I can live. I don't live with fear, phobias, compulsion, because none of that is going to matter much not long from now.

Conclusion: How to Live

How do you live? Ecclesiastes answers the question: How do you live when you look around and it doesn't make sense? It seems like the good things are going to the wrong people and the bad things are happening to the right people, the people that ought to be having a break. Here's what he says—here's how to live—watch this. Palms up. You live palms up. Because palms up is "I surrender and I receive." It means that I'm not going to fight this; I'm just going to take this, my lot—this is my lot. I get this. I'm not going to argue. It's already been set. It already has a name. It's in the can. I'm just going to play the cards I got dealt and I'm going to do that to win.

Ecclesiastes 7:13

Consider the work of God, for who is able to straighten what He has bent?

Look what he says in verse 7: 13: "Consider the work of God, for who is able to straighten what He has bent?" There it is again. It has a name, we already heard that, right? You can't debate with many words—it becomes even more meaningless. You can't straighten what God has already bent. What are you doing? So, what can you do?

This isn't fatalism. It's not fatalism because we have responsibility to worship God with our gifts. So, if we see someone who's hungry, if we can do something about that, we need to feed them. If we see someone who's destitute and it's not their fault and we need to help them, we need to do that. If we see injustice take place, let us do whatever we have to do to stop that. If we see disease, we do what we can to put that to death, right? Anyone enslaved—let's set them free.

So, it's not about fatalism like that, it's this: play hard, as hard as you possibly can. No one gets out of this alive. You'll be dead and forgotten soon. So, enjoy—palms up—enjoy. This is your life, surrendered, accepting all that God has.

Here's a good example. In your lot, your parents were alcoholics, like angry alcoholics. You spent the years fighting that, arguing that, trying to change that. How's that working? What

if you were to just surrender and accept it. And I know that there's memories that you wish you didn't have. There are experiences and emotions that you suffer. But that's your lot. And did you know this? That isolation and loneliness are some of the deepest human emotions. And if you weren't shaking your fist at what could have been and what should have been, you could maybe reach a hand out, because you can hear isolation and loneliness from children of adults that are alcoholics, and you could help heal that wound. Maybe not all things that are bad are bad. Maybe it could be used for good. You see? It's your lot. Why not play it?

There was a song in the late sixties or early seventies, "Que Será, Será." Here are the lyrics:

Que será, será
Whatever will be, will be
The future's not ours to see
Que será, será

Now that song was not a dirge. It was sung by one of the prettiest smiles in all of Hollywood, Doris Day. And she sang it happily, because she had resolved and said, "Que será, será, whatever will be, will be. The future's not ours to see, so why not?" Let's just enjoy this thing, right? Let's just surrender. So, when the good times and bad times come, palms up. Just accept it.

Ecclesiastes 7:14

In the day of prosperity be happy, but in the day of adversity consider—God has made the one as well as the other, so that man will not discover anything about the future.

Look at verse 7:14: "In the day of prosperity, be happy." Boom. "But in the day of adversity—wait, stop, consider, reflect. God has made one as well as the other so that man will not discover anything about his future." You're never going to figure it out, so what does he say to do? Not all the bad is bad. Not all the good is good. If something bad happens, turn your hands up, reflect and ponder the last week. In the last seven days, what did you do to make a good name for yourself? What did you do to seize that moment? All men and women of character and nobility, of strength, the saints that we desire to be like—all had strange and very unique paths.

Every one of them had one thing in common: they all suffered. Because it is through suffering that you get character. Suffering doesn't cause suffering, but you can't have character without suffering.

> **Contrary to what might be expected, I look back on experiences that at the time seemed especially desolating and painful with particular satisfaction. Indeed, I can say with complete truthfulness that everything I have learned in my seventy-five years in this world, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my existence, has been through affliction and not through happiness, whether pursued or attained. In other words, if it ever were to be possible to eliminate affliction from our earthly existence by means of some drug or other medical mumbo jumbo, as Aldous Huxley envisaged in *Brave New World*, the result would not be to make life delectable, but to make it too banal and trivial to be endurable. This, of course, is what the Cross signifies. And it is the Cross, more than anything else, that has called me inexorably to Christ.**
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> **--Malcolm Muggeridge**

Malcolm Muggeridge, one of my favorite British writers, was a journalist in the twentieth century and was very insightful. He was a committed atheist and a communist until he started reporting on atheistic communism, and then he became a follower of Jesus Christ. He says this in reflection on his life, thinking back about the nature of pain and suffering and what it does. "Contrary to what might be expected, I look back on the experiences that at the time seemed especially desolating and painful. But I look at them now with particular satisfaction. Indeed, I can say with complete truthfulness that everything I have learned in my seventy-five years in this world, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my existence, has been through affliction, not through happiness. In other words, if it were possible to eliminate affliction from this earthly existence by means of some kind of drug or medical mumbo jumbo, as Aldous Huxley does in *Brave New World*, the result would not be that life would be delectable, but it would make it too benign and trivial to be even endured. And this, of course, is what the Cross signifies. The Cross, more than anything else, is what pulled me to Christ, that He too suffered."

Have you ever heard the saying "What does he or she know? They've never suffered." Sometimes only pain tells the truth.

So, the passage says this: When good times happen, turn your palms up. You surrender and you receive it. He says to enjoy it, wring it out, drink it in, seize the day. He says that laughter is worship. And he says that during hard times, it's a time to stop and ponder. You don't have to understand it; just receive it. Surrender and let it be. Let it be the thing that changes your life. Don't let what you don't know about God contaminate what you do know. And I know this; this is true: that He who did not spare His own Son, but freely gave Him up for us, how will He not also with Him generously give us what we need? I know that to be true.

Let me tell you my point of view. This is just me and my experience. I didn't even want to talk on this book until I was in my mid-fifties, because I wanted to make sure I understood it, and you have to be a certain age, I think, to grasp it. Now that I'm sixty I look back and it's truer now than ever before. If I could give a gift that I have that some of you don't have, especially you younger people, especially those of you in your thirties, I would give you my fatigue. I am tired a lot. And it has been a blessing in my life. If I could give you my fatigue—because when I was younger and I had a lot of energy, I could turn molehills into mountains. I fought over all things stupid. I didn't have the discernment to know what truly was interesting. I looked. I was so ambitious that I looked so far out into my future that I never lived in the presence. I was not there. And now that I'm tired, all I can think about is the here and the now and the people that I get to enjoy. Oh, I wish you would be tired like me. All I have time for is that little red section in the middle, my lot. There is so much I don't care about now. I wish you wouldn't either.

Solomon is saying, *You know, the closer you get to that pine box, the more life's mysteries go without debate.* Palms up. Surrender all the control and the need to know and just enjoy.

Here's what I've learned in sixty years. I know this is true. And it sounds simple. But this is how you live, okay? You seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all the other stuff will be added. That's it, God's honest truth. The sooner you get there, the happier life will be.

Will you join me in a word of prayer, while you're sitting at home or right here? Why don't you turn your palms up and pray with me?

Dear God, I confess that I act like I know how to keep score, like I know what good is good and what bad is bad and who ought to get each. And I confess that I'm just a future vase of dust and I've argued outside of my weight class and I'm missing the joy of the moment, even if the moment is drama and difficulty. I'm missing those moments.

Lord, you know what? We exalt the saints, but we don't want to do what Peter went through. I acknowledge that the chisels and anvils and hammers of adversity, sorrow, and indignation are better teachers and have greater potential for change than prosperity and joy. So, Lord, I'd ask that You would help me know my lot, that I might enjoy my lot. I'll see You soon, but until then, I'd ask that You would help me wring out every bit of this life that I can for Your glory. Lord, I'd ask that I would have a good name; that I would earn that good name by becoming like Christ in all of life. And we pray this in Jesus' holy name. And everybody said … amen.